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ABSTRACT

This paper explores behavior patterns of lower class black adolescents and contends that their seemingly illogical and irrational behavior is, in fact, meaningful and utilitarian within the context of their environments. The effects of social and residential segregation and the lack of stable social institutions reinforce strong feelings of group isolation and enhance peer group pressure. Behaviors should be seen as adaptations to frustrations of exclusion and symptomatic of the need for new forms of social organization, novel social practices, and self-identity. Thus, rejection of middle class work styles and time orientation reflect the adolescent's need to avoid confronting the humiliating realities of low-paying menial jobs. Moreover, in a social milieu which does not sanction present sacrifices for future rewards, pleasure-seeking activities are not only encouraged but offer a defiant alternative to middle class values. Verbal games such as "the dozens" and "signifying" provide an avenue for manipulating peers and achieving a sense of adequacy. "Soul," the opposite of white hypocrisy and phoniness, gives the black a sense of group cohesiveness and superiority over his oppressor. (KG)

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Most Americans know and accept the sociological idea of a society as a layered system. Our ideology denies the less democratic implications of such stratification. But regardless of fact or ideology, people are evaluated and reacted to partially as a result of their place in the social structure. Within each strata of social class, there is a sort of sub-culture, a style of life in which there is a shared reality and a shared view of the broader society as well as one's own sub-culture. It is social class, with its emphasis on style of life and value systems that make it an important concept for consideration by the humane professions. The understanding of this concept helps to serve as a basis of communication, for unless one understands the value system of the person one is interacting with, effective communication will be seriously limited. There are numerous indications that there are

differences in the style of life of the different stratas of social class, which reflect role socialization and attitudional orientation, which may be basic to the character structure of the mature adult.

It may be said that although there is status up and down (or status high to low) in the American social class system this is a continuum rather than a set of layers, allowing for such differentiations as upper-upper, lower-upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, upper-lower, and lower-lower. This perception of the American social class system is easy to come by if one takes into account each of the many status giving categories separately, such as education, occupation, neighborhood, method of communication, etc.

This paper is a commentary on the style of life of lower-lower class Black adolescent males. It is my central premise that much of the behavior of such adolescents appears from the perspective of middle class values to be illogical and irrational. To the contrary such behavior should be viewed as meaningful and utilitarian behavior within the context of the life style of the lower-lower class Black male adolescent.

Behavior can said to be rational if it helps the individual achieve his goal, whether it is success in school or status in the eyes of his peers. The lower class Black male adolescent acts rationally in those situations in which he is able to plan and choose because he has control and knowledge. He acts irrationally where there are obstructions to his needs and goals. The lower class Black male adolescent, may be viewed as a social type who is the result of polocies of social segregation and discrimination that have prevented him from having the opportunity to achieve or to identify with status positions in the larger society. Thus his behavior, which mirrors his style of life, is an expression of one possible type of adaptation to such blockings and frustrations and reflects, in part, that segment of the population which turns in upon itself and develops within itself standards for the achievement of social status and the basic ingredients of a satisfactory social life. Thus within his own isolated social world, the Black male lower-lower class adolescent attempts to give form and purpose to dispositions derived from, but denied an outlet within, the dominant social order.

Among the Black lower-lower class male adolescent the impact of frustration derived from devaluation may not be experienced in

quite the same way as it is by the Black middle class adolescent, but the total effects of social and residential segregation and the lack of stable social institutions are such as to reinforce strong feelings of group isolation among such adolescents. The behavior of such lower-class adolescents becomes rational when viewed as a possible alternative in a situation where there is isolation from the broader community but greater sensitivity to its goals, where peer group pressures are extremely powerful, where institutional structures are weak, where models of success in the illegitimate world have strong appeal, where specific social movements in the past have not been possible and where novel forms of behavior have great prestige.

As a Black person, particularly as a Black adolescent of lower socio-economic status, he is excluded from many socializing experiences which adolescents in more advantaged sectors of a city take for granted. He lives in communities where the capacity of the population for effective collective controls on his conducts besides that exercised by his peer group itself is limited. Thus the emergence of the self conception of the lower-lower class Black male adolescent represents an attempt to deal with the problems of status and identity in a situation where participation

in the life of a broader community is denied, but where he has become increasingly sensitive to its values, its goals and the images of success. (Technological innovations such as television have probably contributed to this heightened awareness.)

In specifically considering the lower-lower class Black male adolescent, viewed as a social type, the following behavioral characterisitics of such youth can be identified:

1. Behavior as an expression of one possible type of adaptation to frustrations in which there is a turning away from socially expected (and acceptable) behavior and the development of new criteria for social status achievement and social life adjustment. In situations existing social arrangements are frustrating and not accepted as legitimate, but, at the same time, where collective activity directed toward the modification of these limitations does not seem possible, the lower class Black male adolescent is constantly in a state of readiness for new forms of social organization and novel social practices. His life is oriented toward the avoidance of humiliating experiences. He recognizes that he has not been fully assimilated into such institutions as the school, family

church or industry. His behavior then becomes an expression of adaptations to such frustrations. Activities such as duking (fighting or at least looking tough), "sounding" or "playing the dozens" (devaluation of another person's relatives in a provocative way), hustling (any way of making money outside the legitimate world), gigging (partying) and even by their apparent non-activity, namely, being on the "set" (on the street corner). The adolescent's roles are often defined concretely by his success or failure in these activities.

2. Behavior as a manifestation of a process of social change in which a new type of self conception emerges, particularly among older Black, lower class adolescents in the larger urban areas. The new emerging self conception among lower class Black male adolescents is as much a reaction as anything else to the previous forced subordinate status delegated to Blacks in this country. Perhaps the most widely recognized change is that in dress, hair style, certain in-group gestures and speech. In previous years lower class Black male adolescents would "conk their hair" (have processed hair - straightened and

greased down). Natural hair style which reflects an identification with Africans is the current style today with all classes of Blacks, but it began with lower class Black adolescents. Perhaps the most dramatic change though is that of an emphasis upon blackness as being highly esteemed. Formerly Black women were considered more attractive by both men and women if she had "good hair" (hair that is long and soft) and light skin, and there was a devaluation of those physical features that were characteristically Black and which in the past were vunerable points to the Black psyche: blackness and "nappy" hair. It should be pointed out, however, that for many lower class Blacks, blackness was always highly esteemed (the expression was, "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice"). It is perhaps more accurate to regard the present sentiment of the Black community toward skin color and hair style as reflecting the shifted attitude for only a portion of the Black community, but especially the lower-class Black.

Coolness also is a reflection of the new self concept in which the use of gestures in conversation or in dance, or

expressed in a loose jivey walk, the cool handshake (where one may simply extend his hand palm up and another person slaps it loosely with his finger and at the same time pays respect verbally with a conventional "what's happening brother?") or the Black Power handshake.

3. Behavior as a manifestation reflecting a rejection of middle class work styles. Work styles by lower class Blacks often reflects a rejection of the obligations of the middle class work world. The self constraint required by work, which prevents the feeling of spontaneity which is associated with street life and the authoritarian setting of various types of work both serve as reasons for rejection of work. When viewed within the context of device for sustaining self-conception such reasons for rejection becomes significant. The adolescent's emerging defensive feeling of superiority would be openly challenged were he to confront certain social realities of his situation such as discrimination exercised against Black persons looking for work and the tragic fact that only the lowest status jobs in the past and unfortunately still have been available to him. Often times the older Black male adolescent

will avoid mentioning any of these factors which would force him to confront his true position in society and thus pose a threat to his carefully fortified sense of superiority and a threat to a defense of denial to reaction formation.

4. Behavioral characteristics that reflect pleasure seeking behavior with an orientation towards new forms of social organization and unique social practices, resulting largely because of an exclusion from many social experiences that middle class adolescents take for granted. Often times the expression of pleasure seeking activities is in direct antithesis to the central values of the middle class culture. They may in part be viewed as representing an indirect attack against central conventional values. The older adolescent particularly is attacking the values our society places upon planning for the future and the responsibility of the individual for such planning. Planning always requires some subordination and discipling of present behavior in the interest of future rewards (reality principle); the middle class individual for example plans to go to college, plans for his career, plans fo

his family and children. Such an orientation on the part of such middle class individuals is merely the personal and subjective counterpart of a stable social order and of stable social institutions, which not only permit but sanction an orderly progression for expectations regarding role performance. In the environment of the lower class Black, there is little social sanction for such planning in the experiences of the individual. A social milieu which does not encourage the subordination and disciplining of present conduct in the interest of future awards tends, by default, to enhance the immediate. The central theme of such behavior by the lower class adolescent is to distinguish himself from the square and to dabble in activities that the square would not become involved with. Whether one is talking of forms of sexual expression, the use of alcohol, or the use of drugs, one becomes a connoisseur of his own particular pleasurable activity. In one respect the most important aspect of pleasure seeking activity is to intensify the present moment of experiences and to distinguish it as much as possible from the humdrum routine of daily life. The apparent irrationality in using a drug like heroin, knowing full well that

an addictive process may follow, distinguishes the lower class male adolescent from his male, white counterpart. Chance or fate reinforces personal experiences and the adolescent must be ready to move "where the action is" on short notice. The adolescent may not know exactly what or when something will happen, but from past experiences he is able to predict a range of possibilities and will be ready, in position and waiting.

5. Behavioral characteristics emphasizing verbal communications (expressed in music and speech) in which several themes can be identified including religion, primitive sexuality (suggestive quality), aggression, in-group communication (including affection), narcissism and omnipotence (denial of feelings of inadequacy, reaction formation) and superiority. The Black male lower class adolescents' ability with words is a highly valued asset and in some instances verbal ability maybe even more highly regarded than physical ability. This is a value that is learned at an early age by most Black boys in a lower class enviornment. One is able to maintain his rep (reputation) and his image of adequacy often times, mainly

on the basis of his ability to skillfully enter into verbal combat with his peers. The speech system of the lower-lower class Black male adolescent is not in any sense accidental, but is contingent upon a form of social relationships or more generally a social structure. This speech system sensitizes him to a particular form of social relationship which is ambiguous, where the authority is clear cut, and serves as a guide to action. Further it helps to sustain solidarity within the peer group at the same time providing a verbal signaling of the unique differences of its members. It is a language which facilitates the ready transformation of feelings into action. Terms such as "sugar-sugar" (term of affection), "whip-it-to-me" (do something),"hole in your soul" (not really with it), "different strokes for different folks" (individual differences), "rapping" (talking) "cribbing" (place living in), "running it down" (giving information), and "signifying" (goading), represents a blending of style and verbal power by which the adolescent establishes his personality and by which he hopes to manipulate and control people and situations in

his favor. In "playing the dozens" or "sounding" a verbal insult is expressed against an opponent's parents ("your mother wears sneakers to church", your mother's so square she shits brick shit"). Sometimes the verbal insult is leveled against other members of the opponent's family or his environment, particularly his home. The verbal ability of one adolescent to put down his opponent becomes an important area for achieving a sense of adequacy. In a sense it represents an attempt to borrow status from an opponent through an exercise of verbal power. The opponent feels compelled to regain his status by "sounding" back on the speaker or other group members whom he regards as more vunerable.

Blacks in particular have ccntributed to a street tongue, which has been diffused into both the more swinging areas of the middle-class and the broader society. Such expressions as "getting down to the nitty-gritty" and "soul" and "rapping" can be traced to lower class Blacks.

6. Behavior reflecting a utilitarian orientation for time and responsibility. The personal time of the lower class Black male adolescent represents an adaptation to

chance and the possibility of accidental events occuring. In the Black Ghetto there is a merger of today and tomorrow and there is an emptiness to be filled through the pursuit of bread (money) and excitement. Time is oriented toward taking advantage of opportunities, and though this is exactly what rational members of the middle class do in their own setting, time for the lower class Black adolescent is not following the regular clock time with compulsivity. Rather time is built around the irrelevance of clock time, that is the white man's time and the relevance of street values and activities. He can be on time by the regular clock time whenever he wants to be, not on time when he does not want to be and does not have to be. When he wants to meet a "broad" at her lunch hour on the day the "eagle flies" (she gets paid) he will be there and not one hour later, but he may be kicked out of high school for truancy or lose a job for constant lateness and unreliability. Middle class Blacks, who must deal with the organized and coordinated activities in middle class institutions, will jokingly and critically refer to the lack of standard time sense

when they refer to the concept of C.P.T. (Colored Person's Time). In a sense being late is a problem for people caught between two worlds and confronted with the task of meshing standard and street time. The lower class Black adolescent has no self consciousness about being late. To a degree his life experiences have been centered around waiting. If he goes to the out-patient department of a city hospital for medical care, no matter what time he arrives, there will always be a long wait for their appointment and therefore an orientation of "what's the use of hurrying" occurs.

7. The final behavioral manifestation is that which emphasizes the evaluative concept of "soul" as the basis for accepting or rejecting that which it is related to. Most definitions tie soul to Black experiences. In a sense it represents the Black's ability to survive, for it is as if one has made it with so much less. Soul can be many things, a type of food (good food is soul food, a "bowl of soul"), music, a quality of mind (a total way of acting and eating, drinking, dancing, walking, talking, relating to others, etc.) The person who acts with soul

acts directly and honestly from his heart, he feels it and tells it like it is. In a sense soul can be identified with ambition and drive, that is the person with soul, once he makes up his mind, goes directly to his goal, doesn't change his mind, doesn't wait. The current expression in use is that soul is "getting down to the nitty-gritty,"that is moving directly to what is basic without subterfuge. Soul is the opposite of hypocrisy and phoniness. Many Blacks feel that soul is what the Black has that the white does not have. Blacks are "soul brothers" and because they are oppressed they believe sometimes they have nothing except soul, and that makes them better than their oppressor. It is anchored in a past and present of exploitation and deprivation. For the most part Black male adolescents lack the skill and the power to plan to move up and out of the Ghetto. He is in a sense handicapped in a middle class world of school and work. He doesn't possess the know-how to operate effectively in unfamiliar organizations where his street strengths and verbal skills are his visible weaknesses. The point is though he may appear

irrational in moving up and out of the street (which the social structure prevents him from doing) he does act rational in day to day survival in the Ghetto and thus his behavior becomes utilitarian. No one survives there unless he knows what's happening. The Black lower-lower class male adolescent has learned at an early age that school is neither interesting nor salient to his way of life. It is not his school. The teacher may put him down for his dress, hair and manners, and he retreats to his style of life for security and a greater degree of personal freedom, for it is here his controls reach a maximum and he has the kind of autonomy which many middle class males might envy.

In summary, in terms of white middle class values lower class style of life is highly explosive, and yet as I have attempted to point out in this presentation, expressions of emotions is positive and utilitarian and provide a sense of adequacy, personal power, and status.